Creating a Caring Community: An Examination of Mutual Aid Networks

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Introduction

This project investigates mutual aid systems in the US and their organization. I chose this topic because I wanted to focus on the ways that a community can care for those most vulnerable. The state has been shown to be unhelpful to certain populations in the US, and I wanted to focus on the ways that community aid presents another, less impersonal, way to provide aid. The research question that I seek to answer in this Independent Study is "What are the ways that mutual aid systems or groups provide care through non-bureaucratic means?"

Background on Mutual Aid

In literature, the phenomenon that I label mutual aid is put under several names: solidarity networks, self help networks, community aid networks, etc. I chose to make my own definition from descriptions in the literature in order to further define my topic: **"Any form of aid, material or immaterial, between individuals or groups with a communal element, usually involving some sort of social justice critique"**.

Some defining factors of mutual aid are:
- **Community Focus**: Some revolve around ethnicity, race, or membership in the LGBTQ+ community. Some form within immigrant communities or communities with certain medical conditions, such as within disabled populations or those with addictions. Others, like the ones that I focus on, are formed around their local communities.
- **Criticism of systems of inequality**
- **Radicality**: There are many references to mutual aid as being an inherently radical act, forcing us to confront the ways that certain populations are underserved by the state. Other sources explicitly connect mutual aid to anarchist theories.

Theoretical Framework

I chose to incorporate the theoretical framework of Max Weber, specifically his bureaucratic theory. Weber identifies some characterization of a bureaucracy:
- **Rigid Division of Labor**
- **Chains of Command**
- **Separation of the professional and personal lives of workers**
- **Training and qualifications for workers**

Weber deduces that these elements result in a system that is extremely precise, efficient, and accurate. Weber claims that bureaucracies are the most rational from of organization.

In my IS, I evaluate the degree to which the mutual aid organizations that I look at fit this definition of bureaucracy and evaluate the elements of their organizational structure that facilitate their aid activities.

Methodology

- I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with two mutual aid organizations, Trinity UCC (Wooster) and Cleveland Pandemic Response (Cleveland).
- My sample population was mutual aid organizations in Wooster and in Cleveland.
- I had to obtain HSRC approval in order to ensure that no undue harm came to my participants. I obtained consent forms from all participants and provided a copy of my Project Proposal.
- Additionally, I had to consider my positionality when writing this IS. I had to consider the effect of my locational status, community belonging, and student researcher status when conducting my research.

Background on Organizations	
Trinity UCC	Cleveland Pandemic Response (CPR)
1+ Direct Workers, Volunteers, Interns	7-8+ Direct Workers, Interns
Wooster, OH	Cleveland, OH
Population: 26, 751	Population: 367,991
Aid Focuses: Clothing, Bedding, some Financial Support, Breakfast Program	Aid Focuses: Diapers, Groceries, Hygiene supplies, Menstrual Hygiene Goods
Focus: Homelessness/Poverty in Wayne county, Food Needs	Focus: Health Needs, Food Needs
Funding: Donations, one time grant	Funding: Monetary donations from community, grant funding

Results

- **Flexibility for Leadership**: in my interview with CPR, my participants told me about the ways that they are able to contribute to the organization in ways that fit their needs and capacities
- **Approach Towards Recipients**: in both interviews, participants pointed out that they had to be flexible with those needing help and they needed to be flexible in acquiring resources to give.
- **Relational Leadership**: participants discussed the ways that their work was relational and how care, support, and leadership was central to the work they do
- **Ideology and Values**: there were several ideological aspects of the groups I interviewed. Each focused on empathizing with their target populations as humans. They each brought a social justice critique to their work.
- **Community**: each had strong ties to their communities, which also helped them to acquire resources to distribute.

Conclusions

- Mutual Aid organizations are organized in ways that let them be flexible with recipients of aid while also promoting community and relational leadership methods.
- This flexibility and focus on relationships can be especially important when dealing with marginalized populations.
- My findings show the ways tat having an informal organizational structure can act as a strength of an organization and can contribute to their efficacy.

Future Research

Future opportunities for research could address the use of mutual aid systems in specific communities, such as Black, LGBTQ+, and immigrant communities. There are possibilities for research into faith-based community aid. Future research could also consider the role of digital media and social media in supporting mutual aid systems and community aid efforts.

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